



May/June 2016

Today

refresh, refocus, renew

**NAMES,
TITLES,
and
WORK
of the
HOLY
SPIRIT**

ALSO: LESSONS FROM LUKE

Friends:

The Holy Spirit isn't easy to describe. The Bible uses many images. Our cover image this month shows the Spirit as a purifying fire, one of the biblical images for the Spirit. God not only warms our hearts with his love but also sets our hearts on fire so that we have a passion to live for him. Like the apostles at Pentecost, the Spirit's power should embolden us to proclaim wherever we go what God has done.



But Scripture doesn't stop there. The Spirit is also described as a refiner's fire, a consuming fire that burns away all impurity. That sounds less pleasant, doesn't it? I'm not sure I want all my flaws burned away. But that's one of the Spirit's jobs—to make me more holy because God is holy.

In June, Kurt Selles examines the ways the Bible speaks about the Holy Spirit. We'll review the names, images, and activities of the Spirit, just as in previous months we have considered the names of God the Father and God the Son.

But first, in May, Reggie Smith walks us through the first several chapters of Luke's gospel account, detailing the good news of Jesus. Even as we celebrate Pentecost, we'll see how the Holy Spirit worked through history and God's people to tell God's story of redemption.

May you be refreshed, refocused, and renewed in God's Word!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steven Koster". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

—Steven Koster

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**“Lessons from Luke”
Reginald Smith**



**“Names, Titles, and Work
of the Holy Spirit”
Kurt Selles**

Managing Editor: Eleanor Lamsma
Executive Editor: Steven Koster

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ReFrame
Media

may

Lessons from Luke

Reginald Smith

Luke, writing to his good friend, Theophilus, wanted to share “an orderly account” so that others could know “the certainty of the things [he had] been taught” (Luke 1:3-4). Jesus had come as the promised King the Jews had been waiting for, but he wasn’t the kind of king they expected. Jesus didn’t view history from our vantage point but rather through the lens of God’s purpose and plan for all people. Luke provides us a gospel account of Jesus that expands our view of God at work in the world.

This month Dr. Reggie Smith gives us snapshots from the first six chapters of Luke’s gospel account. He highlights the work of the Holy Spirit, the use of unlikely people in God’s drama of salvation, and the call to walk with the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to be born, to live, to die, and to rise again so that we can live with him.

Dr. Reginald Smith and his wife, Sharon, have a college-age daughter and twin teenage daughters. He served as senior pastor of Roosevelt Park Community Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for over 20 years. He also served churches in New Jersey and Illinois and has served on the Back to God Ministries International board.

FREEDOM WRITERS

They were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. —Luke 1:2

Solomon Northup was a free black man living in upstate New York until he was kidnapped and sold into slavery in Louisiana. He wrote down his story of struggle and determination to fight his way back to freedom. His 1855 memoir was called *Twelve Years a Slave*. Northup's book was made into a motion picture in 2013.

Abolitionist Frederick Douglass escaped to freedom from Maryland. His 1845 account, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, made him one of the few African Americans to write a bestseller in the 19th century.

Northrup and Douglass were freedom writers. They had to tell their stories of freedom.

Luke was a freedom writer. A doctor by trade, he wanted to speak clearly about salvation.

We are all looking for freedom from bad habits and twisted hearts. Luke is a fitting guide if we are on the move for good news in this “24/7 bad news” world. Luke wrote his letter to Theophilus, a friend to whom he wanted to give an “orderly account” of the good news of God's salvation through Jesus.

The good news always comes in a package marked “Open at your own risk.” The gospel always comes as a miracle—a surprise that human beings rarely see coming. The miracle of the gospel is that it's too good to be true. But it *is* true, and it calls us to be active witnesses in the freedom story of the resurrected Christ.

Lord, only by grace have we heard your word today. Use us, by grace, to share your story with someone near. Amen.

IN TIMES OF DARKNESS

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah . . . his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

—Luke 1:5

King Herod (the Great) was associated with unspeakable crimes against humanity. During his rule, he killed members of his own family and many Jewish leaders, and he even massacred all the boys under age two in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:13-18).

Herod's actions meant the very worst of times, and Luke understood that. Luke was not drawn to glitzy celebrities, powerful officials, or ambitious CEOs. He focused on outcasts, old people, and foreigners, for the good news of Jesus was a surprise in God's unfolding plan to change the world.

To begin telling Jesus' story, Luke introduced Zechariah and Elizabeth, upright people who engaged in ordinary life with extraordinary holiness and prayer.

They had tried for many years to have a child. But now that

they had reached old age, all hope for parenthood seemed lost. They had lived to please God, and yet God hadn't blessed them with a child.

We often wonder why it seems God doesn't bless people who try hard to do his will, perhaps especially in troubling times. But God's blessing can't be earned or demanded. It comes as a surprise, a gift, by no effort of our own. It's there in God's daily love and care for us—and then sometimes God pierces our hearts with bolts of amazing grace to increase our capacity for faith, hope, and love.

Lord, may your grace amaze me. Help me hand over my failed dreams to you by faith, and to trust in you always. Amen.

A BRIDGE NAMED ZECHARIAH

Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God.
—Luke 1:8

As a priest, Zechariah served as a bridge between God and the people. And on this day he was given the special honor of burning incense in the temple.

I wonder what he was thinking as he went in. Did he expect to hear the voice of God? Likely not. He had probably spent many years being disappointed in his long life. Was he fresh out of hope?

Often our disappointments and broken dreams can set us up for surprise by the miracles of God. On this day, Zechariah was on a collision course with astonishment. Astonishment snatches the covers off our dashed hopes and pulls them into the gospel drama of God.

God sent the angel Gabriel to tell Zechariah that Elizabeth would have a son. With every word Gabriel spoke, Zechariah

became more fearful. When Gabriel finished, Zechariah spoke doubtfully—and then couldn't speak! He couldn't see past the reality of his wrinkled hands, the crow's feet around his eyes, and Elizabeth's being long past childbearing age.

We are often doubtful too. When our disappointments are smothered in the fog of hopelessness, God has to shock us into astonishment because we can't believe the good news is really for us. I'm sure that whenever Zechariah touched Elizabeth's baby bump, he was astonished. Astonishment only happens when we give up trying to control the very thing that only God can give.

Lord, help me see beyond my past to the gift of your astonishing power in my life. In Jesus, Amen.

AT HIS SERVICE

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled."

—Luke 1:38

In Lee Daniels' movie *The Butler*, a hungry, young Cecil Gaines breaks into a bakery. Little does he know that the bakery manager will take him in and teach him how to serve as a butler in a fine hotel. Gaines has to submit to learning carefully from his mentor, who teaches him to think intuitively and to predict what people want or need. Later he lands a job in the White House and serves presidents, prime ministers, and kings for 34 years.

Joseph and Mary likely had hopes and dreams for their future together. But then the angel Gabriel came to this unsuspecting couple, and their dreams turned in a different direction.

The problem with our dreams is that we often end up serving the dream. And then God often intervenes. God has an

uncanny way of stopping us in our tracks, pulling us away from self-serving dreams that are always too small, and challenging us to serve the God of much bigger dreams.

Whenever angels appear in the Bible, they burst in unannounced to people who aren't prepared for such entrances. "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you," said Gabriel to Mary.

Even in her wildest dreams, Mary hadn't thought she would become the mother of God. But God decided to call a virgin girl into the drama of salvation. God's big dreams always swallow up our tiny ones.

Dear Lord, help me to become a servant of your dream through obedience and trust. In Jesus, Amen.

UNSEEN JOY

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.

—Luke 1:41

Elizabeth went into seclusion while she was pregnant. She was an old woman with a miracle child growing inside her. Whenever she felt her midsection, this gift of God likely made her smile. Even before Mary came to visit her, joy had taken hold in her household.

Today people tend to seek happiness more than joy. We often try to fill the hole in our souls with anything that will promise the happiness we so desperately seek. But happiness isn't what fills the gaping void in our lives. That's what joy does. Joy comes from the inside, not the outside.

Mary and Elizabeth knew joy. It came from the miracle inside each of them. As Mary came into Elizabeth's home, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy because the Holy Spirit was working inside both women.

Elizabeth, filled with contagious joy by the Holy Spirit, said to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!"

Joy doesn't come from working, praying, or believing harder; it's a gift from God. We can't create joy; only God can. Joy comes when we realize how much we have been blessed. Mary and Elizabeth knew this, and they were filled with joy at God's blessing and favor.

Today may our joy come from knowing that because Jesus ascended, the Spirit of God comes to work in our lives. Did you know that God wants to live and work in you?

Ascended Lord, help me to know the joy of having your life in me. Amen.

SINGING AND PRAYING

“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.”

—Luke 1:46-48

St. Augustine once said, “He who sings prays twice.” This happened in the home of Elizabeth when her cousin Mary burst into song and prayer. Mary realized that God loved her with amazing lavishness and grace. She responded with overflowing gratitude for the gift of God that grew in her womb. There’s no better way to respond to a miracle than to praise God in song and prayer.

This means we have to make a deliberate decision. We have to choose not to listen to our personal playlists and pay attention to Mary’s song. When we do, we’ll find ourselves humming a different tune.

We might even join Mary in singing, “I’m bursting with God-news; I’m dancing the song of my Savior God. . . . What God has done for me will never be forgotten, the God whose very

name is holy, set apart for all others” (Luke 1:46-49, *The Message*).

Mary sang of God’s strength to deliver the proud and boastful to their rightful place of ruin. Tyrants and dictators don’t give up control willingly; it has to be broken by someone greater. God can do that.

We have to give up our desire for control. Mary kept her heart and hands open for God to fill. She prayed and sang with a heart of humility.

How about you?

Dear Jesus, I want to sing of your tender mercies with a heart of humility. May I make Mary’s song my own today. In your name, Amen.

NAMING RIGHTS

"His mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John."

—Luke 1:60

There is a trend among celebrities today to give their children strange names—like Blue Ivy and North West. That's quite the opposite from the practice in ancient Middle Eastern cultures, where names had profound meaning and pointed to future outcomes. Names were passed down for generations. *Zechariah* meant "the Lord has remembered." *Elizabeth* meant "consecrated to God." Both names were connected to a powerful theme: God's promises. When God promises, he delivers. Every time their names were uttered, the gospel was preached, and God's promises fueled hope for the future.

Elizabeth made breaking news when she said her baby's name would be *John*, meaning "God is gracious." This was God's name for this child, as the angel had

told Zechariah many months before (Luke 1:13).

Sometimes a miracle of God has to break tradition in order to remind people of the undeserved, unpredictable grace of God at work. Grace becomes amazing when we stop trying to force it into our old models.

Do you need to break old habits? Where do you need to practice simple obedience this week? How are you living out your name as a child of the King? You and I are preaching the gospel with every act of obedience to the Lord's work in our lives. God will always keep up his end of the promise.

Thank you, Lord, for writing my name on the palm of your hand. I trust in your faithfulness today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A NEW SONG FOR AN OLD MAN

Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them."
—Luke 1:67-68

For nine months, Zechariah the priest was under verbal house arrest. He could not utter a word to his friends, neighbors, or relatives. But later, after his son was born and he could speak again, Zechariah could not hold back an eruption of the gospel. The Holy Spirit set his heart on fire. A new song announced the new work of God—redeeming, remembering, and releasing the light of his salvation into a dark world.

As a priest, Zechariah had likely been on the lookout for the redemptive promises of God to be fulfilled. Now, with the birth of his son, he burst forth with God's promises to share with everyone. And he did it by singing a new song.

Zechariah knew the Old Testament Scriptures; he knew redemption was coming. It was the amazing old story that God

still had a purpose for his people Israel.

Redemption usually comes when we have no more tricks up our sleeves or plan B's to pull out of our hats. Redemption is out of our control. God never begins with us. He is always ahead of us. Redemption is the miracle of God's redeeming power to make the dream of forgiveness, mercy, and second chances possible for everyone. That's why Zechariah sings, "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come to his people and redeemed them."

Dear Father, thank you for redeeming the broken places in my life for your glory. Help me to sing a new song of grace today. Amen.

THE REVOLUTION BEGINS

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. —Luke 2:1

I watched on television as kings, presidents, celebrities, and prime ministers attended the memorial service of former South African president Nelson Mandela in 2013. People praised him as one of the last great 20th-century leaders in the world.

In 1962, Mandela was arrested for working against the apartheid regime in South Africa. He was imprisoned for 27 years. But in his obscure, small jail cell, Mandela began to set in place the building blocks of a peaceful revolution.

That follows the Lord's style. Luke explains how God's revolution began in a country town with an average young couple expecting a child in the midst of the Roman Empire. Jesus was then born in a cattle stall during a census ordered by the Roman caesar.

God began his revolution in a quiet, unannounced way. He picked Joseph and Mary, who was pregnant through the Holy Spirit, to bear and raise the child who would become the Savior of the world. Joseph's bloodline traced back to King David, so they went to Bethlehem for the census. Mary's delivery time was near, so they urgently looked for a guest room where she could have the child. The revolution was quietly beginning, and the "powerful" didn't notice.

The revolution of God's kingdom is found wherever we bend our knees and worship the Christ child who made room in his life for us.

Savior Jesus, your revolution has launched. Help me to notice your reign in my life each day. Amen.

OUT-OF-SEASON GOSPEL?

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven. . . ."
—Luke 2:13-14

Why are we reading the Christmas story in May, when our minds are looking ahead to summer fun? Isn't this out of season? Not really. We need the Luke 2 story to train our senses to keep alive the gospel narrative. God wants ever to refresh us with the biblical story of his coming to save us.

Shepherds were forgotten people in the first-century Middle East. They were working stiffs on the low rung of society. And yet the good news of Jesus' invasion into the world came to the lonely fields of Palestine. God chose the weak, lowly, and forgotten people as the best vehicle to trust with an impossible dream ("Do not be afraid"), unbelievable news ("in the town of David a Savior has been born"), and evidence of grace and mercy ("this will be a sign to you"). Then an angel

choir broke out in triumphant praise. The shepherds heard the first private concert in the New Testament. The cost was free. The concert hall was their fields. And the music was straight from heaven.

God gave these shepherds a glimpse of heaven, and they were never the same again! They could not keep the Christmas news to themselves.

Salvation has come, and we are saved. That's something to sing about—whatever the season!

Holy Spirit, we have been looking forward to summer things, but help us never to forget the song of salvation that never changes, no matter what the season. In Jesus' name, Amen.

WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation.”

—Luke 2:29-30

Aged Simeon came daily to the temple and waited. The Holy Spirit had told him “he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.” Lots of baby boys came his way, but none was the Messiah. So he waited for God to keep his promise.

How likely was it that Jesus’ parents and this old man would meet in a 35-acre temple complex? That wasn’t a problem for the Holy Spirit, who guided a holy encounter between them. Perhaps as Mary cradled the baby Jesus in her arms, Simeon’s heart began to leap as baby John had done in Elizabeth’s womb. “Moved by the Spirit,” Simeon approached the couple with sheer joy, and as he reached out with his arms, Mary handed her miracle child to the miracle senior citizen. All those years of waiting were not wasted time. The fulfillment of

history lay living and breathing in his shaky arms.

Waiting is never wasted in God’s eyes. We live in a world addicted to having everything happen “right now.” We rush to the next new movie, book, or gadget to enrich our lives. But Simeon understood the one thing that can change our life for the better. He knew these Old Testament words: “Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD” (Psalm 27:14).

The gift named Jesus is worth waiting for.

Lord, calm my anxious heart and the urgent demand for quick results. Help me to wait on you, trusting that your timing is perfect. In Jesus, Amen.

THE FACE OF GOD

[Anna] never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.
—Luke 2:37

Luke relates the story of Anna, an old woman who spent her days and nights in the temple “fasting and praying.” Anna had been married for seven years and then was a widow for many more years. Luke says her father’s name was Penuel, which means “face of God.”

As a prophet, Anna’s vocation was to listen, worship, and pray. She was specially called to seek the face and voice of God for the people of God. But it was not her plan to be a widow, or likely even to be a prophet. Somehow the work of God came into her life, and she moved on from the past to focus on God’s promises with amazing faith.

For decades, Anna spent her all her time in the temple. She held on to God’s promises, and when she saw the child Jesus, she knew that she was seeing the face of God. She gave

thanks and “spoke about the child to all who were looking forward” to God’s salvation.

We are challenged to grow in recognizing the face of Jesus in others. Maybe in the face of a senior who needs your help? Maybe in the face of a neighbor who longs to strike up a friendship? Maybe in the face of a person the Lord has been nudging you toward?

The face of Jesus is all around us, in people who are in need of help, encouragement, and especially God’s love and assurance. Do you see?

Father, help me to learn from Anna’s faithfulness and to pay attention to your face in the people around me. Give me courage to see them as you see them. Amen.

LOSING JESUS

When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him.
—Luke 2:45

Every year, Joseph and Mary took Jesus with them to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. When he was young, they carried him in their arms. As he got older, he likely ran ahead with the other children in their group of relatives and friends, but his parents kept a close eye on him. Outwardly he was like every other Jewish boy, playing with others on the way to the Passover Feast, where they would remember how God saved them from slavery and called them to be his people.

On this trip, however, everything changed as they were heading home. Mary and Joseph lost Jesus. Maybe they had to lose him in order to find out they were not in control.

“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” Those words marked a

shift in Jesus’ relationship with Mary and Joseph. They had lost a son but gained a Messiah. They had to recognize they were not in control of Jesus’ mission.

Salvation will always be bigger than our dreams. It was never under Joseph and Mary’s control. They had to make room in their life for Jesus to fulfill the dream of his Father—to save us all. The trip back to Nazareth that day changed everything. But losing Jesus was the best thing that could have happened to them. Is there anything you have to lose in order to gain Jesus?

Jesus, I’m afraid of losing things I love—such as my dreams, family, friends, or job. But in you I gain the Savior I really need. Thank you for always being there for me. Amen.

ENTERING THE ARENA OF POWER

The word of God came to John . . . He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

—Luke 3:2-3

In today's verses, Luke mentions seven people who were in power at the time John began his ministry. It's important to understand this context. Power has a unique way of changing people. How they handle power affects their character. And these rulers used power to their advantage in destructive ways.

Let's highlight just a couple of the names Luke mentions. Tiberius misused power for his own purposes. According to historians, Tiberius's reign was labeled as dreary and pessimistic. Tiberius's rule was a time of power run amok, unchecked, and destructive.

Herod Antipas, tetrarch of Galilee, used his influence as a ruler to take his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. He had previously married the daughter of King Aretas IV of Nabatea, for a

political alliance, but he ousted her in favor of Herodias. This led to a later retaliation by King Aretas.

Enter John the Baptist. His power source was the word of God. He came preaching "repentance for the forgiveness of sins." He spoke of reconciliation with God and the opportunity for a new start. This was a power for new beginnings, offered through God's mercy.

What is your source of power? Is it the gospel of Jesus? Are you sharing that power so that others may experience it too?

Lord, you bless us with the power to bless others. May we use your Word and all our gifts, talents, and more to be a blessing for your sake. Amen.

THE GUIDE WE NEED

The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

—Luke 3:2

John doesn't seem to be the kind of person you'd like to share a table with in a coffee shop. He seems more like a cranky hermit who shouts at children to keep out of his yard.

What made him so wild and untamed? John was born with a job to do—calling people back to real life with God. Through the Spirit of God, John had a fire in his soul that led him to proclaim the truth and to shock people back to the center of life—God.

In our world of GPS on our smart phones, we think we know where to find life because we are convinced we are not lost. We are sure we are not wandering around in some personal desert. We don't need someone to tell us what's wrong because we follow our own compass—our hearts.

But is that really working? We keep making bad choices at

work and in our free time and our relationships. We chase the latest trends and other gods in pursuit of happiness. Our compass is not leading us in the right direction. We're lost. We need the Holy Spirit to point us in the direction we should go.

John wants to prepare the way for us to meet the One who can level the mountains of our lives into molehills. John wants us to come home to the Savior. He says, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Jesus, on this Pentecost Sunday I want to thank you for the Holy Spirit, who, like a fire in my soul, helps me find my way home and leads me to speak boldly for you. Amen.

THE PROPHET WE REALLY NEED!

John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers!"
—Luke 3:7

John was probably not the kind of guy I'd have hung around with as a young man. He took life too seriously. But he had a very important job: preparing the way for the Savior.

It's highly unusual that someone would work hard only to be second best. But John knew his entire life would revolve around playing second fiddle to his cousin.

When people wondered if John might be the Messiah they were waiting for, he didn't give in to self-deception or ego. He boldly said, "One who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie." John accepted the fact he was only the opening act for the greatest person in the history of the world.

What is the good news in all of this? We need a word from

John to point us to the one true Savior we need.

Maybe the Lord has been trying to awaken you with a word of rebuke or challenge. Receive it as the continuing work of pruning and shaping in your life for his kingdom purposes.

Maybe you are exhausted on the fast track of life. Is it possible the nudge of God has to come another way?

The good news of correction doesn't feel good, but the results are a life readied and fitted for the direction Jesus has always wanted for you.

Jesus, I tend to shy away from people who offer correction in my life. Teach me to receive it, learn from it, and grow deeper in love with you. In your name, Amen.

PLAY YOUR ROLE

Herod . . . locked John up in prison. When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too.
—Luke 3:20-21

Sitting in prison, John likely thought back to all the people he baptized in the Jordan River. Most important, he would have recalled his cousin Jesus, who came to be baptized too.

John had felt very uneasy about baptizing Jesus, for Jesus had no sin to repent of. Yet Jesus insisted that he had to be baptized to fulfill the righteous requirements for the Messiah and to identify with all people. So, with John's help, Jesus was baptized, and everything changed. The heavens opened, and John was astonished to hear the voice of God saying to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (See Matthew 3:13-17; John 1:29-34.)

God's plan of changing the world—and our lives—was launched, and John cooperated in full agreement. That was his role from the very start of

his life. And even in prison his time was not wasted (see Mark 6:20).

Is the Lord calling you to play the role he's assigned to you? Maybe you are called to help a neighbor in need. Maybe you are called to teach a child to read. Maybe you are called to protest for better living conditions or to speak up for life in all places of death and despair. Maybe you can make a path more straight for someone so that they might hear the gospel. Let your faith in the Master drive out any fear of doing his good will today.

Dear Lord, help me to fulfill the role I am assigned in life: spouse, parent, co-worker, neighbor, friend. In my role this day, may I be a blessing, for your sake. Amen.

FAMILY CONNECTIONS

Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph. —Luke 3:23

We value stories. They are the primary vehicles for explaining who we are. All good stories include the names of the people involved.

In our reading for today, Luke describes Jesus through his human family tree. Luke provides this list of names to show that these people were grafted into the family of God's ongoing redemptive kingdom work.

If we skip over the list of names connected with Jesus, we miss an important part of the story Luke is telling. Jesus is the first name we must take into our lives for our stories to make sense. You and I are in God's family because of Jesus.

Our stories, anchored in Jesus' story, provide hope for us. Author Donald McCullough in *The Consolations of Imperfection* shows how we can live into the

story of God's grace in Jesus. He writes, "When my achievements had fallen like sand through open fingers, and when I had no hope for grasping any in the future, I found myself being upheld by grace . . . the eternal love I had believed was freely offered through Jesus Christ was indeed freely offered, with no strings attached, apart from anything I had done or not done. That meant I had value, I had worth . . . everything I needed for rebuilding my life on a far more trustworthy foundation."

What makes your story valuable?

Father, I keep thinking my story doesn't matter. But by your grace, Jesus' story is my story. Help me to tell my good-news story to my friends and loved ones. Amen.

DO YOU REALLY WANT TO BE LIKE JESUS?

Jesus . . . was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil.
—Luke 4:1-2

For years, Professor Richard Lischer taught preaching at Duke Divinity School in North Carolina. He knew all the right answers and could debate with the brightest of students. Then his only son, Adam, came down with cancer, and Lischer had no answers. Still, he could go with what he knew as a Christian. He wrote, “Two paths opened before [my son]: one would take him through the maze of chemo and radiation to an uncertain end. The other, originated in his baptism and nurtured by the rituals of his new founded community, would lead through the labyrinth to his true destination” (*Stations of the Heart*). Lischer believed his son’s identity was forged in his baptism, not in his having cancer.

When Jesus was baptized, he received the amazing confirmation that God was pleased with

him. Then the Spirit led him into the wilderness for a showdown with the devil. Would Jesus follow Satan’s suggestions for living to please himself?

The devil is always eager to help us live for ourselves instead of for God. Will you exchange your true identity as a son or daughter of the Lord for earthly things? Do you really want to be like Jesus? The challenges in the desert can only be overcome if we follow the words of Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

Father, remind me of my identity in Jesus. Help me to resist Satan with your Word and wisdom. Amen.

MERCY OR REVENGE?

Jesus returned to Galilee He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.
—Luke 4:14

Jesus went into Galilee and began preaching and teaching. The people eagerly listened. The synagogues buzzed with excitement as he explained the Scriptures. Jesus was becoming very popular.

But popularity wasn't on Jesus' mind. In Nazareth, his hometown, Jesus was handed the scroll of Isaiah. He read from verses 1-2 of Isaiah 61 and proclaimed, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." He didn't read the rest of the passage about God's vengeance on Israel's enemies and the restoration of Jerusalem. He judiciously rolled up the scroll and spoke from the words he had read.

Though everyone appreciated his words and spoke well of him, they wondered why he hadn't said more. The local people longed for the day when Rome would be overthrown.

Why didn't Jesus complete the text about revenge against the enemies of Israel? Why didn't he preach war or revolt?

Jesus knew what the crowd was thinking. He knew they would soon turn on him and utterly reject him. Jesus was not after applause or compliments. He wanted to bring hell-bent souls to repentance and forgiveness. He was the only one who could save their lives from the wrath of God that they themselves deserved.

We also deserve punishment. We also need a Savior. We need mercy, not revenge. We need God's grace. Agreed?

Jesus, though I often want revenge, I pray for mercy and grace for all who have hurt me, just as you have given grace to me. Amen.

NOT LOOKING FOR FAME

“Truly I tell you,” he continued, “no prophet is accepted in his hometown.”
—Luke 4:24

After Jesus read and preached from Isaiah 61, everyone was amazed and speaking well of him. He was well on his way to becoming the most interesting man in the region.

But Jesus had more to say, showing he had other plans. Songwriter Michael Card writes in *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement*, “[These] are [among] the very first words he speaks upon beginning his ministry. . . . But they are not simply spoken. They are costly words. In the end they will cost him everything. If only he would have the good sense to identify with the rich and powerful instead of the poor, if only he would act in accordance with their values, if only he would dance to their tune. But Jesus does not, would not dance.”

Jesus refused to become a circus act to friends, neighbors, and people of self-importance.

He would not allow himself to be used for fame and publicity. He rejected the temptation to be addicted to the sounds of applause from the crowds. He came to seek and save people who needed grace.

The people were looking for someone to lead and liberate them. They were looking for someone they could rally around, someone who could help them gain the freedom they longed for. They were looking in the wrong places and for the wrong things.

Do you want a Savior or a religious celebrity? We can't have both.

Jesus, thank you for reminding us that it's only through your grace that we can be saved. Amen.

REPENT AND BELIEVE!

"Be quiet!" Jesus said sternly. "Come out of him!"

—Luke 4:35

The man at the synagogue in Capernaum was looking for spiritual relief. How many years had he struggled to be free of the spiritual intruders in his body? How many times had he come to the synagogue for help? Luke wrote that the man was "possessed by a demon, an impure spirit." Maybe the Jewish worship center was the only place in Capernaum where he still believed that God just might show up one day.

Jesus healed this man by evicting the intruding spirits. Luke captures the thrust of the verbal exchange with humor and candor. The demons knew they could not stop Jesus. They showed no resistance or power to reverse the outcome. They had no choice but to state who Jesus really was—"the Holy One of God." At Jesus' command they fled.

For the man who had come to Jesus, no more voices took over his mind. Freedom never looked so calm. No longer were people running away from him out of fear. Freedom never looked so peaceful. With just a few words, Jesus had set this oppressed man free. Freedom never looked so accessible.

Jesus cares enough for you and me to enter into our personal encounters with the devil, the flesh, and the world. He is not afraid to tell evil to get out of our lives.

King Jesus, I know Satan will not leave me alone. Help me to trust in you. May I be your witness in spreading the news of your deliverance against the fallen powers of the evil one. Amen.

HEALED TO SERVE

Simon's mother-in-law was suffering from a high fever, and they asked Jesus to help her.

—Luke 4:38

Simon was concerned for his mother-in-law. She was in the grip of a high fever that could easily kill her.

Jesus likely knew that Simon's heart was filled with anxiety and fear. So he came to Simon's house, where "they asked Jesus to help her."

Then Jesus bent over her like a surgeon who knew what he was doing. He looked beyond just giving her good medical advice. He showed his ability to heal people right on the spot. He demanded that the fever go away, and it did.

What was this woman's first reaction to the deep healing of her body? She likely felt her strength return like an old friend. She quickly resumed her place as a caretaker in Simon's home. Her first response to her healing was to serve others, as

she had always done. It was how she expressed her gratitude to Jesus. She served others as a living witness of the Master's life-giving power.

How do we respond when Jesus heals us—body and soul? Do we, out of gratitude, reach out to serve others who also need the healing that only Jesus can give?

As we go through our daily routines, may we be ready servants in our response for all that God has done for us.

Thank you, Lord, for healing our bodies through medical care and prescriptions and by your life-giving power. Help us to serve you and others as grateful witnesses to your love. In your name, Amen.

THE CATCH OF THE DAY

Jesus said to Simon, "Don't be afraid; from now on you will fish for people." So they . . . followed him. —Luke 5:10-11

Simon made his living by fishing. After a night of fishing, he pulled his boat to the shore and was washing his nets. Jesus was standing at the shore, and he claimed Simon's boat to use as a pulpit for preaching. From this floating stage Jesus brought the word of God with authority and power.

Then Jesus told Simon to go into deep water and let down the nets. Simon protested that they had fished all night and caught nothing—but he would try it again. He likely didn't think anything would happen, but he took a risk and obeyed Jesus, saying, "Because you say so, I will let down the nets."

And before long, the nets were filled with fish. Simon had never seen anything like this before! Simon had heard Jesus' words, but it was Jesus' actions

that "caught" him, despite his doubts.

Jesus knows we fail in the faith business all the time, and yet he doesn't toss us out like yesterday's fish. His words and actions come to assure and prove himself to all who have doubts.

Simon needed to hear the words of Jesus: "Don't be afraid."

We need to hear those words too. "Don't be afraid"—because we often fail. "Don't be afraid"—because our faith is not based on us, but on our Lord, who "catches" us.

Dear Jesus, help me not to be afraid, even though my faith is riddled with doubts at times. Thank you for "catching" me, and for promising never to let me go. Amen.

TOUCHING THE UNTOUCHABLES

Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!"
—Luke 5:13

In Jesus' day, lepers were considered untouchables. Leprosy was a highly infectious skin disease. God had given strict instructions for anyone with leprosy: "When anyone has a swelling or a rash or a shiny spot on their skin that may be a defiling skin disease . . . the priest . . . shall pronounce them ceremonially unclean. . . . As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:2-3, 46).

The leper didn't want to be out-cast anymore. He took a risk that Jesus might take a risk on him. From the dusty ground, the leper uttered his prayer to the visiting Rabbi: "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." This was the trusting prayer of a desperate man looking for restoration.

Jesus didn't react as so many had done before—he moved toward the man rather than away. He reached out and touched the man. Jesus' words "I am willing. . . . Be clean!" set into motion a transformation from the Savior who was not repelled by the man's untouchableness.

Do you need a touch from the Master? Do you need his cleansing? He is walking in your direction. Let him touch you.

Jesus' amazing love heals the very thing that keeps each of us in hiding.

Great Physician, I need to come out of the shadows and be healed. Touch my pain, my sins, my infirmities, and transform them so that I may openly praise you wherever I go. In your name, Amen.

WHY IS SPIRITUAL CHANGE SO HARD?

"Which is easier: to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up and walk?'"
—Luke 5:23

I read an article about why change is so difficult for many people. The author explained that most people fail "to distinguish between technical change and adaptive change. A technical change is straightforward: you have the resources and skills to fix something, so you fix it. An adaptive change is much more difficult. . . . Adaptive change involves soul-searching, learning, and changing who we are and how we live. Why is change so difficult? Because most significant change is adaptive. . . . It involves changing *us*" (adapted from *The Banner*, May 2014).

People had flocked to a home where Jesus was teaching. Likely most of them were not looking for the deep change that meant adapting their lives to serve Jesus as Lord. But they were about to witness something they never expected—a

total overhaul of life. This is what Jesus proclaimed to a packed house of onlookers, religious teachers, a desperate man, and his friends.

The man on the mat was looking for physical healing. He probably never thought Jesus would be interested in healing his sin-sick soul. But that's what everyone needed to hear: "Your sins are forgiven."

Spiritual change is hard! But it takes place when grace surprises and shocks us to praise and thank the Jesus we really need.

What kind of change you are seeking from Jesus?

Lord, I need deep change. Help me accept your forgiveness as the first step toward the change you really want for me. Amen.

THE CINDERELLA SYNDROME

Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.

—Luke 5:29

Do you know the story of Cinderella? Her mean stepfamily made her do all the work in the household. She wasn't allowed to go to the ball because her stepmother and sisters hated her. Out of nowhere, Cinderella was greeted by a fairy godmother. She turned a few mice into readymade horses and arranged for her to go to the ball, where the prince was smitten with her. When the clock struck midnight, everything returned to normal and Cinderella ran back to her old life. The prince conducted a search and found the young maiden, and they lived happily ever after.

Stories like this happen only in children's books and Disney films, right? Yet every culture around the world has a Cinderella story.

Levi was a tax collector for the Romans. He was despised by

the local culture as a traitor and a thief. But Jesus didn't despise Levi. He looked past what others saw and called out with two words to the man whom no one really knew: "Follow me." The heart of Levi was melted by the love of the Master, who looked beyond appearances and saw his value and his need.

Levi needed to repent, of course, and repentance leads to soul health in Jesus, the one doctor with the cure we all need. Unfortunately we all have the disease of sin, and, like Pharisees, we often think we are righteous. Do you want the cure, or are you insisting that you have a clean bill of health?

Father, I need your help to fight sin. Please heal my heart and soul with your love, joy, peace, and forgiveness. Amen.

SOUL CELEBRATION

“John’s disciples often fast and pray, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours go on eating and drinking.” —Luke 5:33

John the Baptist’s disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees followed ironclad traditions of fasting and praying as signs of closeness to God. When they fasted, they made sure there was no joy associated with it. When they prayed in public, their faces were somber and serious. Holiness, in their minds, was not something to enjoy but to measure a disciple’s devotion to God, often in comparison to others.

But Jesus and his disciples were different. By not overemphasizing fasting and prayer, Jesus crossed a theological line that was taboo for most rabbis. Instead of merely following tradition, Jesus challenged the status quo. His opponents concluded he was out of line.

Jesus used wedding celebrations to illustrate his point. Weddings were about celebration, laughter, food, and dancing—joy and

happiness for the bride and bridegroom.

Jesus changed the focus from fasting and praying as ends in themselves to the means of entering into the joy of the Lord, who celebrates life with us all. When traditions are drained of purpose, they become mere rituals. John’s disciples and the Pharisees missed the joy of the Lord hidden in plain sight. We have a reason to celebrate with joy! We have the marvelous Savior, who desires life “to the full” for all his followers (John 10:10).

Jesus, help me to use spiritual disciplines only to increase my joy in you and with others, not to compare or judge. May I celebrate your goodness and grace every day. Amen.

FREE PASS

Some of the Pharisees asked, "Why are you doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath?"
—Luke 6:2

Let's picture the scene. Jesus is walking through fields with his disciples on the Sabbath. They're hungry, so they grab a few heads of wheat, rub them together and enjoy the seeds of nourishment. Some Pharisees nearby see their actions and immediately pass judgment.

Jesus turns to face his accusers. He recounts a story from the Hebrew scrolls that would be familiar to any Jew, especially the "religion police." David was on the run from a demented King Saul. With his life on the line, he needed safety and food. David found help from Ahimelek the priest, who gave him permission to eat the consecrated bread offered to God and usually to be eaten only by the priests (see 1 Samuel 21:1-6; Leviticus 24:5-9).

The Sabbath was a day to stop working and to focus on God.

The Pharisees, over the years, had added rules to the Sabbath that were more about performance and boundaries than reflecting on God's mercy and grace. The rules became ends in themselves rather than means to an end.

The intent of Sabbath worship, however, was to honor the Lord over all of life and to celebrate and give thanks for his wonderful love and deliverance. In this way Jesus gives us a free pass to celebrate, so let's take it with gratitude!

How will you worship God today? Is your worship a ritual or an act of gratitude for God's grace in your life?

Father, you provide for me in countless ways. Increase my thanks, and help me to stop and reflect on your love. Amen.

THE TRUE INTENT OF THE LAW

Jesus said to them, "I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" —Luke 6:9

During World War II, France was occupied by Nazi Germany. Anyone caught helping Jews would be killed or sent to concentration camps. In the small village of La Chambon, Pastor Andre Troceme and his Protestant church decided to hide Jews in their homes, provide them with new identities, and integrate their children into their schools. This pastor and his parishioners were credited with saving 5,000 Jewish lives. They violated the Nazi's hateful law and risked their own lives to help others.

During Jesus' time, a man with a deformed hand had worshiped in the synagogue for years. But on one particular Sabbath day, he met Jesus. "Get up and stand in front of everyone," said Jesus. As the man got up, he was probably not sure what was going to happen, but he was will-

ing to obey. And Jesus was willing to demonstrate, especially on the Sabbath, that God was interested in helping his people. Jesus was God's answer in ushering in his kingdom of mercy, grace, and restoration. Jesus was not made for the Sabbath; he fulfilled it in his coming as the true Messiah.

Doing good on any day is the best way to live by the will of God. Visit a sick friend, help a single mother, mentor a child. Let's go and act like Jesus today!

Lord, I want to bring your kingdom into my own family and neighborhood today. Nudge me to serve you in order to usher in a culture of life and mercy. In your name, Amen.

JESUS LOVES MISFITS

When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles. —Luke 6:13

It was time for Jesus to choose the ones who would be his apostles. He didn't go through normal hiring practices of accepting resumes, conducting background checks, and interviewing potential candidates. Jesus used a better way: he prayed for God's guidance in choosing his followers.

The list was not promising. Making the cut, among others, was a hothead named Simon, a doubter named Thomas, a tax collector named Matthew, and a betrayer named Judas. Most would trust and believe in him. Some would deny him. All would abandon him. Jesus knew all that. And he was willing to grant them his power to represent him.

The word "apostle" means "one who is sent." In other words, the apostles were chosen by the grace of God to be sent as

his representatives to the world that needs a Savior.

You and I are not chosen because of our pedigree, race, or spiritual grade point average. We are chosen to do things in his name that are beyond our imagining. The Master of the universe has asked the Father and the Spirit to fill us with radical obedience even when we often feel like running the other way. The King of kings has tapped us to be his witnesses.

Jesus came to save sinners like you and me. He chose sinners as the best representatives of living by grace alone. We are his misfits in the world, sent to tell others about him. Let the church say amen!

Jesus, thank you for making me your ambassador. May I tell others all you have done for me. Amen.

june

Names, Titles, and Work of the Holy Spirit

Kurt Selles

It's easy to overlook the Holy Spirit. Since we know what human fathers are, we can relate to God the Father. We can picture and relate to Jesus too, since he lived on earth and the biblical writers present him so vividly. But the Holy Spirit can seem harder to connect with and understand. Scripture presents various images of the Spirit, and there's some mystery about his work. Yet the Bible's teaching about the Holy Spirit is extremely rich.

Last month, Christians around the world celebrated Pentecost, the day when God poured out his Holy Spirit on all believers (Acts 2). This month we'll reflect on the Holy Spirit, studying the names, titles, and activities of the Spirit as presented in Scripture. We'll focus first on references in the Old Testament, then on references in the New Testament, and finally on the Holy Spirit's work.

I pray that these short meditations will help us learn about the Holy Spirit; inspire us to worship the Spirit as God almighty; encourage us to seek his power, wisdom, and guidance; challenge us to use his good gifts for loving service; and prompt us to ask him to grow his divine fruit in our lives.

Rev. Kurt Selles is director of Back to God Ministries International, the ministry that brings you these Today devotions. He is a graduate of Calvin Theological Seminary and received his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt University. Previously Kurt taught missions and served as director of the Global Center at Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Alabama. Before that, he served as a missionary in Taiwan and China. Kurt and his wife, Vicki, have three children.

CREATOR SPIRIT

The earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

—Genesis 1:2

One of the most frightening features of life for ancient people was chaos. Health, food, and security were unpredictable. Chaos was symbolized by the formless sea, the abyss, an empty void, a chasm, or a gaping hole. The threat of chaos struck terror in people's hearts.

The Bible's opening words speak of order and comfort in the face of chaos. Genesis 1:1 boldly proclaims, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Then chaos is introduced: "The earth was formless and empty." And next come words of great comfort: "The Spirit of God was *hovering* over the waters." Some Bible versions use *brooding* here.

But *hovering* or *brooding* isn't something that ended when God made the world. The Creator Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, still hovers or

broods over his creation. Like an eagle hovering or brooding over its young, the Holy Spirit still sustains the world, because our world belongs to God.

Today we fear chaos too. So many things can come at us from so many directions so quickly that it can seem our world is threatened with destruction and death.

Are you afraid? Today, deep in your heart, may the "Creator Spirit, by whose aid the world's foundations first were laid," assure you that he is present, hovering, brooding, upholding, sustaining you and his world.

Holy Spirit, who with the Father and the Son created the world, fill our lives with your presence, comfort, and courage. Amen.

BREATHING SPIRIT

The LORD God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.
—Genesis 2:7

The soap opera *As the World Turns* aired on American television from 1956 to 2005. The title has a vaguely mysterious, even philosophical ring, and it's unclear exactly what it means. A more interesting question is "*How does the world turn?*"

God's Word tells us that his Spirit set the universe in motion and continues to uphold it each day. This means that all things living—animals, vegetation, organisms—live and have their being through the Holy Spirit's power.

As the Spirit breathed life into our first parents, Adam and Eve, so also he has breathed life into all who have lived and who live today. That alone makes all living things precious—and, above all, us human beings, for we are made in God's image!

The Holy Spirit gives life in another way as well. The creation account goes on to explain how each of us, starting with Adam and Eve, has turned away from God (see Genesis 3). Apart from God, the Bible explains, we are dead in our trespasses and sins.

But the same Spirit who turns the world also turns hearts and minds to Jesus, creating new hearts to love and serve God. Praise the Holy Spirit today for creating and sustaining the world. Praise him also for turning our hearts to Jesus.

"Creator Spirit, by whose aid the world's foundations first were laid . . . from sin and sorrow set us free and make thy temples worthy thee." Amen.

INSTILLING SPIRIT

Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

—Numbers 11:29

Today's verses relate a bleak story as the Israelites travel through the wilderness. They complain that they have no meat, and God provides them with quail. Tucked in the middle of this story is an important truth about God's Holy Spirit.

Burdened by Israel's whining, Moses cries out to God in despair. Graciously answering, God not only provides Israel with meat; he also relieves some of Moses' burden.

To relieve Moses of the heavy load of leading so many people, God promises to rest his Spirit on seventy elders of Israel. When the Spirit fills those elders, however, some of the Israelites, including Joshua, try to quench the Spirit in them. Moses responds, "I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

God's Spirit remained on the seventy, as well as Joshua, who later succeeded Moses as leader of Israel. This story points forward to the prophet Joel's words that God would one day pour out his Spirit on *all* of his people, young and old, men and women alike (Joel 2:28-29). At Pentecost, Moses' prayer was fulfilled (Acts 2). Since Jesus, *the* Prophet, has come, God's Spirit has been poured out on all of God's people.

Take comfort in God's Spirit in your life today, and live as his prophetic voice in the world.

Holy Spirit, you have been poured out on us. Live in us, we pray, in such a way that we speak to a world that needs to hear your voice. In Jesus, Amen.

EMPOWERING SPIRIT

“See, I have chosen Bezalel . . . and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills.”
—Exodus 31:2-3

Do you know who Bezalel is? When reading the instructions for building the tabernacle, it's easy to miss him. Indeed, it's easy to skim through these detailed chapters to get to more “interesting” stories. But these chapters remind us of two very important things.

First, building the tabernacle, fitting the priestly robes, and fashioning the ark of the covenant reminded Israel of God's holiness. These things should also remind *us* of God's holiness, and that God calls his people to devote their best to him.

Second, these accounts remind us of the work of the Holy Spirit. God chose Bezalel, the great grandson of Caleb, to supervise these projects (see 1 Chronicles 2:19-20). God also empowered Bezalel by filling him with the Spirit of God, who blessed him with wisdom and all kinds of

skills. Bezalel then led a group of artisans to carry out their work, using the very best materials the people could bring (see Exodus 25:1-9).

If we skim over these “construction” passages too quickly, we miss something about God and his Holy Spirit. God has called and gifted each of us with many different talents to be used for his glory. Keep your calling in mind today as you go about your work, whatever it is, to give him glory.

Creator God, you have made us for your glory. Fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we can glorify you in our tasks today and always. Amen.

SPIRIT OF COURAGE

The Spirit of the LORD came on him, so that he became Israel's judge and went to war.
—Judges 3:10

The book of Judges relates one disheartening story of failure after another. Over and over, we see a vicious cycle in which Israel, settling into the promised land, slides back and forth from faith and obedience to lack of trust and disobedience, followed by oppression from the surrounding nations.

That's the scene in our passage. After Joshua, who had led the people of Israel into the promised land, died, the writer tells us, "The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD; they forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asherahs." Those were the gods of their neighbors.

But God in his mercy and patience poured out his Spirit on Othniel, Caleb's nephew, to deliver the people from the hand of their oppressors. Othniel, "lion of God," became a mighty hero of Israel. After his victory

over Israel's oppressors, Othniel ruled over Israel for forty years, a period of rest and prosperity. Following his death, however, the people again rejected God, became oppressed, and cried out to God, who delivered them through other Spirit-filled leaders, such as Deborah, Gideon, and Samson.

At Pentecost, God poured out his Spirit on all his people, including you and me. We too fight battles, sometimes failing, sometimes succeeding. Take courage today in the Spirit's power, asking for God's help in all you think, say, and do.

O Holy Spirit, we dare not trust ourselves in the spiritual battles we face. Give us courage to trust your power in us to face the challenges of each day. Amen.

HEART CLEANSER

"I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."
—Ezekiel 36:27

Our passage from Ezekiel speaks comforting words. Here the Sovereign LORD promises to use his people to declare his holiness among the nations.

But were the people of Israel up to this difficult task?

Already in Egypt we saw their hesitation to follow God. They grumbled and complained, twisting and turning against God's will, refusing to trust him. And then once they established their home in the promised land, their disobedience spiraled out of control.

We wonder if it was even possible for the people of Israel, on their own, to reveal the holiness of God. And the sad fact was that it was completely impossible for them to do so.

But in this passage, as well as others sprinkled throughout Ezekiel and the prophets, we

find God's promise to bolster the hearts, minds, and wills of his people by putting his Spirit in them. He promises to cleanse them from their impurities and give them a new heart. God himself, through the Holy Spirit, makes his people a witness to the nations.

Just as the people of Israel fell short in following God, so each one of us struggles to be holy. Call on the Spirit today and ask him to fill you so that you can be holy and reflect his holiness in his world. He will turn your heart of stone into a heart of love and goodness.

Holy Spirit, work in our hearts today so that our lives will reflect your presence and power in the world. Amen.

ANOINTING SPIRIT

Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him . . . and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David.

—1 Samuel 16:13

When people were anointed (and filled with the Spirit) in the Old Testament, it was usually for a specific time and purpose. For example, when the Spirit came on Saul (who was anointed the first king of Israel before David), Saul joined with some prophets in speaking God's word (see 1 Samuel 9-10). This sign reassured Saul and all Israel that God had chosen him as their first king. Later, however, Saul spurned God's word, so the Holy Spirit left him.

Now, after God had chosen David and Samuel had anointed him, "the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully" on David "from that day on." David remained anointed to the end of his life, and though he wasn't perfect, God promised that his throne would be "established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16).

Why didn't the Spirit leave David? Because God had graciously *chosen* to anoint David permanently and to provide the Savior of the world, Jesus, through David's family line. This was a major step in fulfilling God's promise to anoint or fill all of his children—female and male, young and old alike.

So when, by God's grace, we come to believe in Jesus, we too are anointed *permanently* with the Holy Spirit. As you ponder the Spirit's work in your life today, remember the promise that God will never leave or forsake you!

God, you have anointed us with your Holy Spirit. Help us to trust you and to serve you in your world. Amen.

SPIRIT OF THE MESSIAH

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him.

—Isaiah 11:1-2

Today's passage, perhaps the climax of Holy Spirit passages in the Old Testament, reveals several important things about the Spirit while describing the Branch from the family line of David, son of Jesse. This picture points to the promised Messiah, Christ our Savior, filled with the Holy Spirit.

Here we see the fullness of the Spirit's ministry of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge, and the fear of the Lord. All of these qualities are bestowed, first and foremost, on the Messiah, the "Anointed One," the "Christ," Jesus himself. And these qualities are poured out fully and permanently, not partially or provisionally.

Here we see the Holy Spirit radiantly shining entirely on the promised Savior of the world, and this prophecy looks ahead to something we can see more

clearly in the New Testament: the Holy Spirit always points to, empowers, and promotes Jesus as the only One through whom we receive salvation.

The Holy Spirit empowers Jesus' followers too. Because of Christ's finished work to pay for our sins and reconcile us with God, we are given new life through the Spirit, who comes to live and work in us so that we can become like Christ. In this ongoing process the Spirit prompts us, too, to point to Jesus, the only One in whom peace with God can be found.

"Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me." Use my life to point others to Jesus. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS A DOVE

At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. —Matthew 3:16

Have you ever wondered why the Holy Spirit first appears in the New Testament as a dove? Wouldn't it have been more impressive for the Spirit to come like an eagle or a hawk, suggesting power and might?

The answer can be found in Isaiah 42, where God introduces and commends his "servant" and then promises to place his Spirit on him, sending him out to bring justice to the nations. How? Not through power and might, but through the servant's purity, gentleness, and humility: "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out" (Isaiah 42:3).

This prophecy is fulfilled, in part, at Jesus' baptism when the Holy Spirit descends as a dove, demonstrating that Jesus loves the weak, cares for the suffering, and, above all, offers peace

and reconciliation with God. We hear this later in Jesus' own words: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. . . . For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-29). God the Father confirms this mission with his tender words about his beloved Son, with whom he is well pleased.

Through the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we know that peace and reconciliation with God the Father comes from knowing Jesus. Walk in that peace today and always.

Holy Spirit, descend as a dove on us today. May your presence bring peace in our lives so that we can share the peace of Jesus with the world. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS FIRE

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.
—Acts 2:3

The New Testament uses several unique images to represent the person and work of the Holy Spirit. One image shows the Holy Spirit as fire. On Pentecost, following the sound of rushing wind filling the house where the apostles were staying, what appeared to be tongues of flame rested on each of them. They were immediately filled with the Holy Spirit, and their lives were changed forever.

A number of Old Testament passages help us understand the Holy Spirit as fire in the New Testament. Primarily fire represents the presence of God, as when Moses encountered God at the burning bush, and later when God appeared in a pillar of fire to lead his people in the wilderness (Exodus 3:2; 13:21).

In Acts, the tongues of fire represent the presence of God the Holy Spirit. This fulfills

John the Baptist's prophecy that the Messiah would baptize "with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11-12). This also means that the purifying work of the Holy Spirit carries on in our lives today. The Spirit comes into our lives to transform us, cleansing and purifying us to become more like Christ in our daily living.

The thought of being purified by fire can be terrifying, but we can be assured that the same holy God who gave his only Son and poured out his Spirit at Pentecost wants to make us holy, just as he is holy.

Holy Spirit, enter our lives today as you did with the believers at Pentecost. Cleanse and purify us so that we can radiate the glory of Jesus in our world. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS WIND

A sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. —Acts 2:2

If you've experienced a heavy windstorm, you know the power and strength of wind. It's somewhat strange; you can't see the wind, but you certainly can detect its power in the way leaves are blown around and tree branches bend and break.

Both the Hebrew and Greek languages convey vivid images of the Holy Spirit. The Old Testament Hebrew word for God's Spirit (the "Spirit of Yahweh") means "spirit" and "breath." The New Testament Greek word also means "spirit" and "breath," as well as "wind."

In the story of Nicodemus, Jesus points out that the Spirit of God is like a wind that blows where it pleases; while lacking shape or form, the Spirit definitely has a will. And a person's will is a key aspect of their personality.

Jesus' likening the Holy Spirit to wind or breath also echoes the

Spirit's power as the life-giving force of creation. And Jesus makes clear to Nicodemus that the Spirit gives life to people who are spiritually dead.

The story of Pentecost not only represents the awesome power of God's Holy Spirit; it marks the beginning of a new era. From Pentecost onward, the Spirit breathes new life into the spiritually dead, moving them to follow the risen Lord Jesus.

How is the Holy Spirit blowing in your life today? Listen for the Spirit's breathing and moving as he gives you opportunities to be a witness for Jesus.

"Breathe on me, Breath of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love the way you love, and do what you would do." Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS WATER

“Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”
—John 7:38

Here’s some sound advice: Drink more water. A person can live for 60 days without food, but can’t survive three days without water. We must have water to live. We all know how a plant can droop and die without water. How much more our physical bodies!

The New Testament uses water as an image of the Holy Spirit. On the last day of the Festival of Tabernacles, the setting described in John 7, a priest would use a golden pitcher to draw water from the Well of Siloam and pour it out at the foot of the altar while worshipers sang the *Hallel* of praise and thanksgiving from Psalms 113-118. On this particular occasion in John 7, over the din of the crowd, Jesus announces the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

“Rivers of living water” represent the Holy Spirit’s presence

and power poured out on Jesus’ followers. The Spirit’s presence points to his cleansing and sanctifying work in the hearts of God’s children. The Spirit’s power points to the spiritual ability to know, follow, and glorify Jesus and to participate in his coming kingdom. The Spirit’s presence and power flow out of the believer’s heart like water in a parched world.

By all means, for your physical health, drink more water. But for eternal health, accept the refreshing spiritual presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your life today and always.

Holy Spirit, fill our lives with your presence and power today, so that your love may flow from our hearts like streams of water in a dry and thirsty land. Amen.

HOLY SPIRIT: THIRD PERSON OF THE TRINITY

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

—Matthew 28:19

We often take biblical truth for granted. One teaching that we sometimes accept without thinking is the Trinity. The early church, however, fought fierce intellectual battles as they hammered out the basic doctrine of one divine being consisting of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One reason for these early struggles was that the word *Trinity* doesn't occur in the Bible.

The divinity of the Father is obvious, and lots of texts reveal the divinity of Jesus, the Son. But what about the divinity of the Holy Spirit? As we've seen, the Old Testament includes many references to the Holy Spirit, but the Spirit's divinity can be more clearly seen in the New Testament, especially in Jesus' teaching.

One of the earliest expressions of the Trinity used by the

early church was the Apostles' Creed, a statement of belief based on today's verse in Matthew 28, often called the "Great Commission." With these words Jesus sends his followers into the world to baptize new believers into the one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Not three baptisms in the names of three beings, but one baptism in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: *one* God, *three* persons.

We should never take the Holy Spirit for granted. He is God working in perfect union with the Father and the Son in our lives and in this world.

Holy Spirit, we easily take you for granted. Forgive us, and awaken us to your power in our lives and in the world. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS SEAL

He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.

—2 Corinthians 1:21-22

In the ancient world, a seal was usually made by etching or carving the symbol or name of an important person on a piece of stone or other hard substance, and it was pressed into wet clay or soft wax to leave an impression representing that person. A sealed object or document conveyed authenticity, authority, and ownership.

In our reading for today, the apostle Paul uses the image of a seal to convey the Holy Spirit's role in marking us with God's ownership. In his sealing work, the Holy Spirit communicates deeply in our hearts that we belong to God and that nothing will ever separate us from his love (see Romans 8:35-39). The presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives serves as God's mark on us, as well as a guarantee that in belonging to God

we will blossom and flourish as we grow in our walk with Jesus.

Do you ever feel lonely? Do you sometimes have doubts? Do you sometimes even wonder if God loves you? Take comfort and courage today in knowing that you have God's seal on your heart; you have the Holy Spirit's presence not only as a mark but also as an assurance that he will never leave you or forsake you.

God, you have sealed our hearts with the Holy Spirit. In our fears and our doubts, may your Spirit speak to us and through us so that we may know and share the love of Jesus. In his name, Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS COUNSELOR

"I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth."

—John 14:16-17

As he shares a last meal with his disciples, just hours before his betrayal and death, Jesus drops a bombshell: he is going to leave his followers behind. Jesus assures them, however, that he will not abandon them but will provide them a counselor, or "advocate."

Paraklete, the Greek word Jesus used here, referred to a person who came alongside during a time of legal difficulty. It has been variously translated as "counselor," "advocate," "comforter," "intercessor," "strengthener," and "standby." This promised advocate, or counselor, is the Holy Spirit.

Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit holds immense comfort. His followers are not alone. Though he is not physically present, Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit to comfort and counsel his followers. Jesus also sends the Holy

Spirit to lead them into truth. So when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, he was not on his own but was sent by the Father and the Son to live in Christ's followers, helping them to serve the risen Lord Jesus. Jesus has also given the Holy Spirit with an important caveat: "If you love me, keep my commands."

Are you obeying the words and commands of Jesus? If not, repent and turn to him. If so, lean on the power of the Counselor in your life today, rest in him, and be guided by him in your walk with Jesus.

Jesus, thank you for sending the Holy Spirit. May he work in our lives as counselor and comforter, as we seek to obey you today and always. Amen.

THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

“The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”

—Luke 1:35

In the angel Gabriel’s announcement that Mary would bear God’s Son, we learn several important things about the Holy Spirit. We discover that the Holy Spirit is God. We also learn that the Holy Spirit plays an integral role in God’s plan of salvation for humankind. The Spirit miraculously initiates the conception of Jesus, the Christ, in Mary’s womb.

But this passage also raises an important question about the power of the Holy Spirit: Does he *overpower* people? The key concept here is “overshadow.” The idea of “overshadowing” reminds us of the Lord’s presence hovering over the tabernacle as a “pillar of cloud” in the wilderness (Exodus 40:38). It also looks forward to the cloud that hovers over Jesus and the disciples on the Mount

of Transfiguration as a sign of God’s presence (Matthew 17).

So the Holy Spirit overshadows in the sense of demonstrating God’s presence, but not in the sense of dominating Mary, or anyone else. Mary, in the awesome presence of God in the person of the Holy Spirit, bends her will to do God’s will.

When the Holy Spirit presents himself in your life today, remember Mary’s words, “I am the Lord’s servant,” and serve God with all of your heart, soul, strength, and mind.

Holy Spirit, overshadow us today with your presence, and help us to bend our wills to do your will. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

THE CONNECTING WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

—2 Corinthians 13:14

We hear the word *synergy* a lot today. Synergy usually refers to two or more agents working together for greater effect. Synergy captures an essential truth about the Holy Spirit, his connecting to great effect.

Paul demonstrates the connecting work of the Holy Spirit in the blessing at the end of 2 Corinthians. This blessing, often used at the end of a time of worship, vividly portrays Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together with grace, love, and fellowship in perfect harmony to carry out their grand plan of salvation.

But this trinitarian blessing also reminds us of the connecting work of the Spirit in our life together as Christ's body, the church. It's in our worship together through singing, hearing the Word, and praying that we receive the renewing and

strengthening fellowship of the Holy Spirit, our comforter and helper. It's through our fellowship together as sisters and brothers, made possible through the connecting work of the Holy Spirit, that we too play a part in God's plan of salvation, his kingdom coming.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, connecting in your life today, remind you of God's great love and his desire for you to join in the work of his kingdom.

Triune God, thank you for the connecting work of the Holy Spirit. Connect us today with you and each other in doing your will on earth. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT SANCTIFIES US

To God's elect . . . chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to be obedient to Jesus Christ and sprinkled with his blood. —1 Peter 1:1-2

We don't use the word *sanctify* very often in everyday conversation. Nevertheless, it refers to a crucial work of the Holy Spirit in our everyday lives. Very simply, *to sanctify* means "to make holy."

In the opening of his letter to the churches in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey), Peter speaks of sanctifying in the wider context of salvation. God loves us so much that even before we were born, he chose us to be his children. After we were born, despite our desire to reject him, God sprinkled us with the blood of his Son, Jesus, and redeemed us. Now he wants us to live for him.

Helping us to live for God is what the Spirit's "sanctifying work" is all about. As Peter indicates, our participation in this can be described mainly as *obedience*. Sanctification is the

moment-by-moment process by which we more and more submit our hearts, minds, and bodies to following Jesus.

Can we do this by ourselves? I know that my will is not strong enough to be perfectly obedient.

Thank God that the Holy Spirit sanctifies us by working in and through us! The Holy Spirit has not only set us free from sin but also lives in our hearts and reminds us to follow Jesus more closely. As we daily follow Jesus, we become holy, set apart for serving God.

Holy Spirit, sanctify our hearts today so that we will love what you love and do what you desire us to do. In Jesus, Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT KINDLES TRUE FAITH

Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father."

—Galatians 4:6

As much as we might like to, it's physically impossible for us to fly. We need an airplane or some other flying device to do that. In the same way, it's spiritually impossible for us to make ourselves right with God. We need faith in the Savior to do that for us; we need Jesus Christ. Today's passage in Galatians tells us that faith itself comes as a gift from God, when he places the Holy Spirit in our hearts so that we cry out to him as our heavenly Father.

Until the Spirit works in our hearts, we remain spiritually dead and in rebellion against God. When God by his grace sends the Spirit into our hearts, he fills us with new life, kindling true faith in us so that we know Jesus as Savior, and giving us the true knowledge that he has made us for himself.

There's tremendous comfort and assurance in this teaching about the Holy Spirit. This isn't a once-off quickening. Instead the Holy Spirit speaks to us continually, reminding us that we are not our own but that through Jesus we belong to God.

As you go about your work today, reflect on the Holy Spirit's work in your life. He has given you faith so that you can call out to your heavenly Father. Don't ever let anything you encounter rob you of that truth and joy.

God our Father, you have placed your Holy Spirit in our hearts to help us see Jesus. Help us this day, we pray, to trust and serve you. Amen.

HOLY SPIRIT, PROVIDER OF SPEECH

“Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit.”
—Mark 13:11

Being tongue-tied can happen to all of us. Someone says something to you, and you don't know how to respond. But what about being speechless with terror in sharing your faith? Jesus gives assurance that even in those situations the Holy Spirit can and will speak through us.

Although Jesus describes a high stakes scene, his promise here recalls promises found in the Old Testament. The Old Testament prophets were moved to speak by the Holy Spirit. This speaking ministry of the Holy Spirit only occurred occasionally in the Old Testament, but the prophet Joel foretells of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit would be poured out *on* and speak through *all* of God's children (Joel 2:28-29; Acts 2).

Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit's work is for ordinary life,

but it's also for times of persecution. Jesus is obviously describing persecution in our passage. And on separate occasions in the book of Acts, the Holy Spirit speaks in and through Peter, Stephen, and Paul when their faith is on the line in desperate situations.

We have this same promise of the Spirit's presence and power in our lives. We may or may not be faced with such difficult circumstances, but we all have the opportunity to point to Jesus every day. And if we face persecution, we can be assured that the Holy Spirit will speak in and through us. That's a great comfort!

Spirit of God, work in our hearts and give us the right words in all situations, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

GRIEVING THE HOLY SPIRIT

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.
—Ephesians 4:30

Most of us dislike disappointing someone or making them sad. But if we don't like to disappoint or sadden others, we should really hate to disappoint God.

Disappoint God? Yes, we can disappoint, grieve, or sadden God the Holy Spirit.

That we can sadden the Holy Spirit teaches us something important about him. Although the Bible uses some impersonal images of the Holy Spirit (such as wind, or a dove), the fact that the Spirit can be grieved reminds us that he is a person and not some impersonal force.

How do we grieve the Holy Spirit? We do this by failing to live holy and righteous lives.

Paul reminds his readers—and that includes us—that they should no longer live like unbelievers in the darkness and

“futility of their thinking.” All who believe have been purchased with the precious blood of Jesus, and now they are called to live in his light. Living in Jesus' light means following him in our thoughts, words, and deeds.

That we can grieve the Holy Spirit implies that we have a certain power over him. This is not power to manipulate, but to cooperate—or not.

Do you want to work with the Holy Spirit in the world today? Don't grieve him. Instead, work with him by living in holiness and righteousness as a witness for God's glory.

Holy Spirit, please forgive us when we grieve you. Help us to follow Jesus today in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT, AUTHOR OF SCRIPTURE

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

—2 Timothy 3:16-17

These words in 2 Timothy are often used as a prooftext for the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible. As important as that argument may be, it's not Paul's main point here. Paul's instruction to the young man Timothy is primarily about practical advice for godly living.

From an early age, through his Christ-following Jewish mother, Timothy had been exposed to the Old Testament Holy Scriptures. Paul encouraged Timothy to continue to read and to trust God's Word to learn about righteous living. God's Word can be trusted because it is not the word of fallible mortals but the word of the eternal God himself.

In God's plan of salvation, the Holy Spirit worked in and through the authors of the Bible to reveal God's design and pur-

pose for us. Paul describes the Spirit's work as "God-breathed." Just as the Holy Spirit breathed into Adam's nostrils, giving him life (see Genesis 2:7), so the Holy Spirit breathed into the work of the Bible's human authors, giving the Scriptures divine life and ultimate authority for questions about faith and life.

Do you want to know how to please God in your life today? Look no further than the inspired, infallible words of the Bible. The Holy Spirit gave God's Word to us to help us glorify God and serve him.

Holy Spirit, author of the Bible and of new life, breathe in our hearts today so that we can serve God in the world. Amen.

HOLY SPIRIT, CONVICTOR OF SIN

"When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment."
—John 16:8

No one wants to stand in court and hear the words "Guilty as charged" spoken to them. No one wants to be convicted.

And yet convicting or proving guilty is one of the important tasks of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit convicts us of our sins. Although we know in our hearts that we rebel against God, we often have a hard time admitting our sin. Unless the Holy Spirit works in our hearts, we don't fully know our utter unworthiness before God. The good news is that after he has convicted us, the Holy Spirit plants faith in our hearts to recognize Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord!

Jesus indicates that the Spirit's convicting work focuses not just on believers but also on the world. The powers, the principalities, the systems, the cultures, the governments of

this world are also in rebellion against God. And the Spirit is in the world convicting rebels of their rebellion.

So there's good news and bad news in the work of the Spirit. The good news is that the Holy Spirit is at work in us and in the world, and that through a change of heart people can be renewed. People come to know Jesus through this convicting work. The bad news, sadly, is that people who continue to reject the Holy Spirit ultimately remain under God's judgment.

In what ways do you sense the Holy Spirit working in you?

Holy Spirit, convict us of our sin and rebellion against God, so that we may be saved in Christ to live fully in love and service to God in his world. Amen.

HOLY SPIRIT, INTERCESSOR

We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. —Romans 8:26

The Bible teaches us many things about the Holy Spirit as a counselor working alongside and within us, convicting us of sin and guiding us to full life in Christ. And in our Romans 8 reading today we learn of a specific way in which the Spirit ministers to us. The Holy Spirit helps us to pray and even prays for us.

In Romans 8, Paul is seeking to encourage his readers in the face of discouragement. Paul urges his readers to keep concentrating on the glory that lies before them in Jesus Christ. Wait and hope, he goes on to say, because the fullness of all that God has promised *will* come, and that day *will* be glorious!

As hope helps us to keep going in times of great difficulty, so the Holy Spirit helps us when we pray. When we pray, we

don't always have the words to express what we think or how we feel. In fact, some of our deepest needs and desires can't even be expressed in words. Paul calls these "wordless groans." But the Holy Spirit "intercedes"—or, more literally, goes between—on our behalf. He intercedes for us before God. He helps us pray.

Keep hoping and praying. And while you're hoping and praying, be assured that when you have longings deep in your heart that you can't even fully express, the Holy Spirit presents your needs directly to God the Father, who hears and answers all our prayers.

Holy Spirit, thank you for interceding on our behalf. Give us hope and help us to pray. We trust you in Jesus' name. Amen.

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

—Galatians 5:22-23

Which do you prefer—mealy, tasteless apples, or crisp, tangy apples? Almost certainly, you prefer good fruit, right?

Jesus compares good fruit with godly living (Luke 6:43-45), and in our passage today, Paul uses fruit to teach us something about the work of the Spirit.

Just as a sick or dying tree will bear bad fruit, so people who are dead in sin are prone to sexual immorality, impurity, hatred, discord, and jealousy, among other things. The person whose heart has been made alive to Jesus Christ, however, naturally produces good fruit: “love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

Which fruit looks more appealing to you? Good fruit, right?

Unfortunately, no one can produce good spiritual fruit on their

own. That effort is doomed to failure. Only with the working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts can we know Jesus and begin to produce the life-enriching fruit of the Spirit. Working together with the Spirit, we bear the marks of a godly life in our daily living.

What kind of fruit are you producing? Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit is a handy guide to see how you’re doing in your walk with Jesus. Ask the Spirit today and every day to work in your heart to produce good and wholesome spiritual fruit.

Dear Jesus, forgive us when our lives produce bad fruit. Please send your Spirit to produce in us fruit that is pleasing and glorifying to God. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND LOVE

Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.
—1 Corinthians 13:13

The four-letter English word *love* packs a lot of meaning. It can refer to family love, friendship, romantic love, and sexual love. The Greek text of the New Testament uses a variety of words to express different types of love. The most important “love” word in the Bible, *agape*, expresses the highest form of love, the selfless love of God for human beings.

The apostle Paul, in this “love chapter,” offers one of the most beautiful and profound descriptions of love (*agape*) in all of literature. Genuine love (*agape*), he writes, is self-giving, patient, kind, forgiving, generous, and humble. This kind of love, says Paul, *never* fails.

In the demands, frustrations, and annoyances of everyday life, don’t you wish you could have even a fraction of this kind of love? Try as I might, I often

fail to show selfless love for the people around me: family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, and others.

Selfless love, though, is a fruit of the Spirit, a love that the Holy Spirit plants in our hearts when he comes to dwell in us. By continuing to ask him to work in our hearts, we can grow in self-giving love.

When you struggle with showing selfless love, remember that the Holy Spirit is working in you, bearing fruit. Ask him to help you produce the greatest kind of love, the love that God has for us all.

Dear Jesus, thank you so much for your selfless love that makes us right with God. Please send the Spirit to work in our hearts so that we can love as you do. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND JOY

"I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."
—John 15:11

We often hear the word *enjoy*—meaning “to receive pleasure from something.” But the word *joy* isn’t used very often. What exactly is joy?

According to the dictionary, *joy* consists of a “feeling of great happiness” from “doing, finding, or getting something.” And that sounds a lot like *enjoy*, receiving pleasure from something!

The Bible speaks of joy quite differently. Joy is a fruit of the Spirit, and we see how rich joy is in Jesus’ “vine and branches” teaching in John 15. Real joy results from knowing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Real joy has to do with selflessly loving the people around us. In short, real joy has to do with growing in obedience.

As with all of the fruit of the Spirit, real joy can’t be manufactured through an act of our

will. Joy comes from the Holy Spirit, who works in our hearts. We experience deep joy as the Holy Spirit makes the work and knowledge of Jesus become a greater reality in our hearts. And real joy prospers and grows as we grow in our faithfulness to Jesus.

Do you have true joy? If the Holy Spirit is actively working in your life, you absolutely do. You can increase that joy today by asking the Spirit to let your life blossom in obedience and service.

Dear Jesus, forgive us for the times we let others and circumstances rob us of joy. Please send your Holy Spirit to work in us, helping us to know joy and to serve you. Amen.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND PEACE

The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

—Philippians 4:7

Do you have peace? Peace often seems elusive. There are so many things to worry about each day, not to mention peace in the troubled world around us. Because we don't have control over most things, we can often find ourselves filled with fear and anxiety. How do we find real, lasting peace?

True peace comes from the Holy Spirit. Above all, the peace of being made right with God comes by Jesus' work of salvation, applied to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. Being right with God provides eternal peace.

That's wonderful news, but how do we find peace to ease our everyday fears and anxieties? Peace in our daily lives—in the midst of and despite constant turmoil and uncertainty—comes to us as a fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22).

The peace of the Holy Spirit brings well-being, contentment, and wholeness, whatever the circumstances.

But like the other fruit of the Holy Spirit, we can't produce this kind of spiritual peace on our own. We can, however, ask the Spirit today to continue working in our hearts to grow the fruit of peace that allows confident living and service. And we can be assured that the Spirit will give us "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding" and which guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Dear Jesus, forgive us when we are filled with anxiety and fear. May your Holy Spirit continue to bear the fruit of peace in our hearts so that we can joyfully serve you. Amen.

GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT

To each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.
—1 Corinthians 12:7

What a blessing it is to be on the receiving end of God's amazing gifts!

First of all, we receive the gift of salvation even though we *don't* deserve it and *can't* earn it. It comes freely to us through the Holy Spirit from Jesus, who paid for our sins with his own sinless life and then rose again, conquering death for our sake.

And there's more: as Paul makes clear in our reading today, with salvation in Jesus we also receive the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

Now, salvation and the Spirit's presence are gifts to be shared. How absurd it would be to take Jesus' love and not share it with the world. That would be, as someone has said, like being a mail carrier and keeping all of the good mail for yourself!

The gift of the Holy Spirit in our lives helps us to share the love of Jesus in the world, and each of us also has gifts to use for the benefit of others. We do that by bringing our gifts to the task of building up the body of Christ, the church, and by sharing God's love with all the people around us.

Give thanks today for salvation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. And ask the Spirit today to reveal his gifts in your life so that you can share Jesus and strengthen the church.

Holy Spirit, we praise and thank you for our salvation in Jesus, and we humbly ask you to help us use the gifts you have given us to share Jesus and build your church. Amen.

CHRIST'S GIFTS THROUGH THE SPIRIT

Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. —Ephesians 4:11-12

Have you ever received gifts or trinkets that you don't really need? In our family we've accumulated some unneeded and tacky gifts over the years. Many of these simply gather dust in our closet.

Closets may be appropriate for tacky gifts, but not for the precious gifts of the Holy Spirit. Paul stresses that, like salvation, these gifts are from Jesus applied through the Spirit, and they are for building up the church.

The gifts Paul mentions include some high-level leadership gifts, and we might say to ourselves, "I don't have those gifts." But those aren't the Spirit's only gifts. Actually more than twenty gifts of the Spirit are identified in the New Testament, and they aren't exhaustive of all the gifts the Spirit may give.

One thing we can be sure of is that each of us has gifts from Jesus through the Holy Spirit. We may not dismiss these gifts and put them in a closet. These precious gifts are not to be used for our glory but for God's glory, "so that the body of Christ may be built up . . . attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ."

What gifts do you have? How will you use your Holy Spirit-given gifts today to build up the body?

Dear Jesus, thank you for sending your Spirit to live in our hearts. May we use the gifts that the Spirit gives us to glorify you and to work with you in building your kingdom. Amen.

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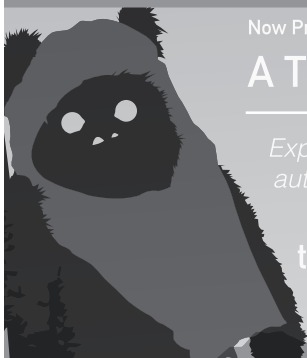
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